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INFO RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC  
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RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA  
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SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS  
OFDA SAN JOSE FOR CALLAGHAN AND GELMAN  
OFDA WASHINGTON FOR CATHLEEN MARTIN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: EAID SENV EAGR ECON PREL PGOV CO  
SUBJECT: COLOMBIA REQUESTS U.S. SUPPORT TO COMBAT SPREADING FIRES

¶11. (SBU) Summary and Action Request: The GOC requested emergency USG fire-fighting assistance on January 6 to help combat a growing number of fires caused by an atypical drought in Colombia. More than 60 municipalities have been affected by such fires, damaging an estimated 1,700 hectares. Our preliminary appraisal is that the situation is not yet a national disaster, but could rapidly escalate to that level, particularly as the drought extends over the next few months. Ambassador requests that the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) send U.S. fire-fighter experts to Colombia to assess the situation and make recommendations. Ambassador also urges that OFDA and SOUTHCOM assign JTF-Bravo helicopter assets in Honduras -- already configured, trained, and experienced at fire-fighting in Brazil and Paraguay -- to deploy and provide reinforcement to Colombian efforts at specific fire locations. Ambassador believes the helos should deploy from one of the seven named DCA bases. End Summary.

¶12. (SBU) Minister of Defense Gabriel Silva contacted the Ambassador on January 6 to request USG fire-fighting resources, notably U.S. aircraft, to combat an increasing number of fires caused by an extended drought. Minister Silva identified five separate regions where Colombia needs air support. Environment Minister Carlos Costa raised similar concerns with EconCouns and provided a detailed list of requested assistance.

#### Air Assets and Equipment Request

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¶13. (SBU) The GOC request highlighted the need for: five UH-60L "Blackhawk" helicopters; five Huey II helicopters; five C-208 Caravan aircraft; two B-350 King aircraft; and Airborne Fire-Fighting System equipment for one C-130 Hercules aircraft and two C-295 Casa Espanol aircraft. The Colombians also requested five helicopter Bambi Buckets and 8,000 gallons of chemical fire retardant for the Bambi Buckets. The request also included fire-fighting equipment and gear to supplement the poorly-outfitted Colombian fire-fighters on the ground.

¶14. (SBU) Minister Costa indicated that 64 municipalities already have combated fires and the figure is rising daily; an estimated 1,700 hectares have been burned. He expects fires to spread further and conditions to deteriorate as the drought in Colombia continues over the next 2-3 months. Colombian weather forecasters predict a particularly dry period as a result of the El Nino weather phenomenon. Costa noted that more than 140 municipalities are under emergency fire alerts. Both Ministers indicated

President Uribe would soon declare a national emergency.

**¶15.** (U) Over the past few days in the capital, Colombian helicopters have been transporting buckets of water from a local park to fire sites in the Bogota hillsides. Some fires continue to burn, with some near residential areas. Embassy housing has not been affected. On January 4, Post issued a Warden message to warn all U.S. citizens of the wildfires.

Post's Assessment

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**¶16.** (SBU) Our judgment is that the current crisis does not yet rise to the level of a national emergency (imminent danger of massive death and destruction), but it is a very serious local emergency in many areas. The fires have begun to cause significant environmental damage in central Colombia. Colombia is traditionally a wet country with lots of rainfall (more than 70% of its energy is generated by hydroelectric plants). Fire-fighting on a large scale goes beyond the GOC's experience and capabilities, and expanded outbreaks could escalate the crisis quickly into a national emergency.

Action Request

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**¶17.** (SBU) Ambassador requests that OFDA immediately send a small team of fire-fighter experts to Colombia to assess the fires and make recommendations concerning strategy and required resources to combat the flames. The Ambassador also urges that OFDA and SOUTHCOM authorize JTF Bravo helicopter assets in Honduras to deploy to Colombia to reinforce local efforts in specific fire locations. We understand these assets are properly configured and well trained with previous fire-fighting experience in Brazil and Paraguay.

BROWNFIELD